

Ambassador Feinstein's Remarks for 9/12 PISM Event

September 12, 2011

Thank you, Marcin, for that introduction. It's a privilege to be here with you at another excellent event organized by PISM. Under your leadership, Marcin, PISM has become a champion of the transatlantic partnership and the free exchange of ideas, which are vital in democratic countries like the United States and Poland and which are central in our response to the threat of terrorism.

Yesterday, our two countries – and the rest of the world – paused to honor the victims of terrorism and to reflect on our common resilience in the face of terror. It was also an opportunity for me to thank Poland for its steadfast support, partnership, and friendship, from the early hours immediately after the horrific 9/11 attacks through the past decade.

Today's seminar therefore holds special meaning for my country and for me personally. I say this, having worked both in think tanks and in government myself for many years, including at the Pentagon, where 125 colleagues lost their lives while serving their country ten years ago. I am also a native New Yorker, and I know full well the consequences of terror.

So let me say thank you to Marcin and PISM for hosting this event today, and thank you to the panelists and audience members for participating. Together, we are demonstrating our commitment to keeping our nations safe.

Before I get into counter-terrorism strategy, I'd like to talk a bit about what 9/11 means. Above all, the anniversary of 9/11 is a day to remember those we lost, and to stand with their families and loved ones. As we remember those who were lost on 9/11, we also honor all victims of terrorism, including those who have been targeted by al Qaeda and other groups around the globe. Citizens of over 90 countries perished in the attacks of 9/11. This is a day that already lives in infamy, in America and around the world.

Yet, September 12, the day after, was a day when we demonstrated our true resilience, a day we can be proud of. On September 12, 2001, the NATO alliance met to invoke Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, declaring that the terror attacks of al Qaeda were indeed an attack on all. On September 12, 2001, Poland showed its solidarity with the United States as hundreds of ordinary Poles left candles and flowers in front of our Embassy. We received condolence letters and real pledges of support from the Polish government.

My Embassy staff remember traveling around Poland in the days after the attacks and seeing flowers and letters in public squares even in cities where there was no official American presence. Ten years ago, the United States truly felt the bonds of friendship and partnership with Poland. And we do so today.

This year, America honored the 10th anniversary by observing September 11 as a National Day of Service and Remembrance. Americans, including administration officials and Americans overseas, joined in a broad range of service projects to improve their communities and demonstrate their resilience. Through these acts of service, we drew on the spirit of unity that prevailed in the immediate aftermath of the attacks.

President Obama visited New York; Shanksville, Pennsylvania; and the Pentagon to pay tribute to the lives of those who were taken from us on 9/11, and to reaffirm that their legacy is a safer, stronger, and more resilient America. Secretary of State Clinton also took part in commemoration activities in New York.

Here in Poland, our Embassy participated in a number of events commemorating 9/11, many of them initiated by Poles. I attended a beautiful public ceremony with National Security Bureau head Koziej, Deputy Prime Minister Pawlak, Foreign Minister Sikorski and Warsaw Mayor Gronkiewicz-Waltz at the site of the 9/11 memorial in Skaryszewski Park, following the annual tradition established by the administration of Praga-Poludnie.

I joined the Community of Democracies, a group of Polish leaders, and Ambassadors from around the world in a lunch discussion about the resilience of democracies in the face of terrorism.

We also attended a wonderful symphony concert with President Bronislaw Komorowski at the Philharmonic in commemoration of 9/11. Through these activities, we Americans have once again been reminded of our deep friendship and strong partnership with Poland.

Yet to continue honoring the victims of terrorism, we also must continue developing and improving our counter-terrorism strategy to prevent future attacks. This depends on constantly assessing the status of the terrorist threat around the world.

Moreover, we must evaluate all of the tools available to us to combat terrorism, while adhering to our core values and principles as we respond appropriately to the threat.

My first observation is that there has not been a major terrorist attack in the United States since 9/11. Unfortunately, there have been attacks in countries around the world, including India, Indonesia, Iraq, Norway, Russia, Spain, the United Kingdom, and many others. Though not all of these attacks are transnational in character, the United States takes a principled stand in opposing violent extremism in all of its forms.

So what is the threat today? Al Qaeda has been significantly weakened with the deaths of Osama bin Laden and other leaders, but is still dangerous. It still has the ability to carry out attacks and to inspire others to do so. We are focused on al Qaeda, its affiliates and adherents.

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is reaching far beyond its base in Yemen and is seeking to carry out attacks like its attempts to bring down cargo and passenger planes bound for the United States.

Other extremist groups in the border region of Afghanistan and Pakistan not only continue to protect al Qaeda's remaining leadership; they are plotting attacks like the failed Times Square bombing. And from Somalia, al-Shabaab is looking to carry out more strikes like last July's suicide bombings that killed 76 people in Uganda during the World Cup.

Therefore, our counter-terrorism strategy must be shaped by a deeper understanding of al Qaeda's goals, strategy, and tactics. Al Qaeda seeks to portray itself as a religious movement defending the rights of Muslims, but the United States and its allies will continue to expose al Qaeda as nothing more than murderers. Such terrorists justify their attacks based on the false conviction that violent extremism is the only means of achieving political and social change.

Yet recent events have shown that peaceful political protest is a far more powerful tool than terrorism. Indeed, al Qaeda's ideology has lost resonance, as we have seen in the Middle East and North Africa, where political change has been inspired by the language and actions of non-violence—including Poland's own history of peaceful democratic transformation. Faith in universal rights and unity has proven more potent than violence and terrorism. Minister Sikorski rightly pointed out yesterday that, ten years after 9/11, al Qaeda has utterly failed in its stated objectives.

The people of the Middle East and North Africa deserve full credit for the ongoing changes in the region, as do the people of Poland for your historic and peaceful transformation. The Arab Spring has been a complete repudiation of violent extremism and a victory for civil society. As Secretary Clinton said to the U.S.-Islamic World Forum this April: “Al-Qaeda’s... claims to speak for the dispossessed and downtrodden have never rung so hollow. Their arguments that the only way is violent change have never been so fully discredited.”

In addition to the transnational threat from al Qaeda in far away places, we must also consider the danger of extremism in our own countries. The tragic shootings in Norway and Arizona have shown us that social tensions, often over immigration and minority groups, can lead to disastrous consequences. I was interested to hear Polish experts at our lunch yesterday talk about the importance of preserving tolerance and peaceful political dialogue here in Poland, particularly as immigration might rise in the future. It is of course very hard to be both open to the world and vigilant about security at the same time, but we must all try our best.

So how should we democratic nations respond to these developments? I think it might be helpful for this group to hear how the U.S. see counter-terrorism strategy today. President Obama has said that these dramatic changes in the Muslim world mark a historic moment of opportunity. John Brennan, the President's Counter-terrorism advisor, has added that the Arab Spring is a historic moment for counter-terrorism as well.

We must place ourselves on the right side of history, as America did with Poland during the Cold War, pledging our support for the political and economic reforms and universal human rights that people in the region are demanding. Meanwhile, Al Qaeda and its ilk have been left on the sidelines, watching history pass them by.

Generally, though, we believe that our counter-terrorism strategy must include five key elements: adhering to core values, building security partnerships, applying counter-terrorism tools appropriately, building a culture of resilience, and countering ideology through effective communication with foreign nations.

Above all else, we must maintain the core values that define our societies, including freedom, fairness, equality, dignity, hope, and opportunity. We cannot let extremists change who we are with their agenda of death and destruction.

Moreover, our values must be a weapon of soft power, inspiring and attracting through example. There is no need to discuss these values in much detail in Poland, since you know them – and hold them dear – as much as we do in America. As Foreign Minister Sikorski likes to say, you have democracy in your DNA. In fact, promoting democracy has been, and should continue to be, one of the key areas of counter-terrorism cooperation between the United States and Poland.

By upholding fundamental human rights and the rule of law, by ensuring stability, and by creating conditions for prosperity, democracies offer the best defense against terrorism and violent extremism. This is something that Presidents Obama and Komorowski have discussed both in Washington last December and here in Warsaw this May. Secretary Clinton attended the 10th anniversary of the Community of Democracies in Krakow last year to support the construction of democratic institutions around the world. So when the Polish government and civil society groups support nascent democracies in Afghanistan or Tunisia, they are pursuing an important component of counter-terrorism strategy.

The second element of a successful counter-terrorism strategy is security partnerships. No country alone can eliminate every terrorist or terrorist organization. The United States and its partners are engaged in the full range of cooperative counter-terrorism activities—from intelligence sharing to joint training and operations and from countering radicalization to pursuing community resilience programs.

Sharing intelligence with partners allows us to take advantage of new sources of information, technology, and analysis. As the United States has expanded intelligence gathering and the size of our Special Forces, we have used them together with partners around the world to deny al Qaeda funding, recruits and safe havens.

But the United States partners best with nations that share our common values, and Poland is a prime example. We highly value Poland's role in improving our common security.

America and all of the NATO allies greatly appreciate Poland's contribution to the mission in Afghanistan and honor your sacrifices. Together with Poland, we honor the 29 fallen Polish soldiers, who made the ultimate sacrifice in Afghanistan. I personally traveled to Afghanistan and saw the contributions Polish soldiers and civilians are making. I have frequently heard from American generals how bravely and honorably Polish troops serve there. American troops are proud to serve under Polish tactical command. Poland's work in hosting the Jackal Stone counter-terrorism exercise for special forces from seven countries in September 2010, was another example of Poland's many important contributions.

The third principle of counter-terrorism is to apply our tools, technologies, and capabilities appropriately. What I mean by this is that we must ensure that our CT efforts are consistent with our national laws, with our values, and with our long-term strategic objectives. We have to use all the tools and technologies available to us, but consider the strategic consequences of our actions.

We must pursue a “whole-of-government” effort that reflects the resources of our whole government. Our strategic objectives are to reduce our vulnerabilities in our homelands, to take the fight to al Qaeda wherever it manifests itself, and to disrupt the communications and finances of terrorists around the world.

The United States has made great strides over the past decade in capturing or killing terrorists and disrupting cells and conspiracies. We have seen that precise and persistent force can significantly degrade even an enemy as elusive as al-Qaida. So we will continue to go after its leaders and commanders, disrupt their operations and bring them to justice. But we've also learned that to truly defeat a terror network, we need to attack its finances, recruitment, and safe havens. This requires strong cooperation between different parts of the U.S. government, including the Departments of State, Defense, Treasury, Homeland Security, and our intelligence agencies.

In particular, we must prevent al Qaeda from acquiring or developing weapons of mass destruction, and President Obama is leading the global effort to secure the world's vulnerable materials. Counter-proliferation is an important part of President Obama's foreign policy, but it is closely related to counter-terrorism policy. It has also been successful, including the signing of a new START treaty with Russia and the hosting of a Nuclear Security Summit in Washington in 2010 where dozens of countries pledged to reduce and secure nuclear materials.

The United States and Poland are working closely together to build our counter-terrorism capacities and reduce our homeland vulnerabilities. We have a bilateral counter-terrorism working group that meets regularly to coordinate our cooperation. We also have a strong day-to-day partnership between our Embassy, the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Justice, and the Polish government. We cooperate in fields like export controls, the Proliferation Security Initiative, aviation security, and jointly train third countries like Georgia.

The fourth element of our strategy is building a culture of resilience, including economic prosperity at home. We in government must do all we can to prepare for future terrorist attacks, at the international, national and local levels. We are aware that the next major attack could come in cyberspace, with crippling economic and physical effects, and are working in government and with private sector partners to strengthen our cyber defenses.

We are training our first responders, police and fire fighters, to be ready for all possible types of attacks. The United States is focused on sharing information between local and national levels of government, as well as with international partners. Local law enforcement is often the front line of defense in keeping us safe from terrorism, and must be strengthened.

But resilience depends just as much on the vigilance and fortitude of common people. It was a hot dog vendor in Times Square and a flight attendant on a transatlantic flight, after all, who disrupted potentially major al Qaeda attacks. We must therefore communicate openly with our own populations, building mutual trust and cooperation. We must provide a story of hope triumphing over fear.

Resilience also means being strong economically at home, a necessary prerequisite for being strong abroad. Expanding trade and investment, and making our economies more competitive are essential to an effective counter-terrorism strategy. Economic success not only enables financing for counter-terrorism and development, but also provides a more attractive soft power model.

The fifth tenet of President Obama's CT strategy is a focus on countering extremist ideology. The United States works actively with partners around the world to undercut al Qaeda's fabricated legitimization of violence. But we must differentiate between those who adopt an ideology of hate and those with real grievances, particularly in countries where individuals are deprived of basic rights and freedoms. In fact, listening and showing respect for the Muslim world must be at least as important as communicating our message and values.

We must make clear that Muslims are accepted in Western countries, including the United States and Poland. In Turkey, on President Obama's first trip abroad, he spoke frankly: "The United States is not, and will never be, at war with Islam. In fact, our partnership with the Muslim world is critical not just in rolling back the violent ideologies that people of all faiths reject, but also to strengthen opportunity for all its people." We must follow through with true friendship, cooperation, and partnership.

So these are what I believe the key elements of a successful counter-terrorism strategy ten years after September 11, 2001. But as with any policy, we need to be flexible and adjust to changing circumstances in the future. It seems to me that the future of counter-terrorism policy will depend on at least three variables: developments in certain countries such as Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen; the influence of international law and organizations; and the future economic and military capabilities of the United States and its partners.

It may seem obvious, but terrorism, like politics, is local. So the future of terrorism will depend on events in individual countries— will governments allow their citizens freedom and dignity? How well can immigrant communities be integrated in developed countries like ours? What role will religious and civil society groups play? How much economic growth can be generated to give people jobs and hope?

International law, about which I have written in my past life, certainly has a role to play as well. How will the international community deal with weak and failing states like Somalia? Will international law enforce the principle that human rights are protected in all countries? Can international courts and organizations improve justice in developing countries?

Finally, we must consider what our own capabilities and resolve will be like in the future? Will the United States and its partners invest enough in security to ensure stability beyond our own borders, or will we hope that terror will be limited to faraway places even in today's globalized world? Will we have the economic strength to be able to make these choices?

The world has changed dramatically since September 11th. In the immediate aftermath, the world was gripped with uncertainty. The international community did not, however, succumb to fear, but instead showed resilience and resolve. In the past decade, terrorists and violent extremists have failed to achieve their goals. Individuals, communities, and nations have shown that they are stronger than fear.

Rather than being paralyzed by the violent actions of few, people around the world have continued to build better futures for themselves and their children, and have helped their neighbors do the same.

To keep our countries safe from terrorism and violent extremism, we need a robust strategy. But we also need to maintain our core values, including a free exchange of ideas as happens at PISM events. So let me wish you all luck in your panel discussion today and follow-on conversations.

As President Obama has said, “Our cause is just. Our spirit is strong. Our resolve is unwavering. Like generations before us, let us come together today and all days to affirm our commitment to protect freedom, liberty and the inalienable rights of all peoples across the globe.”

Thank you.